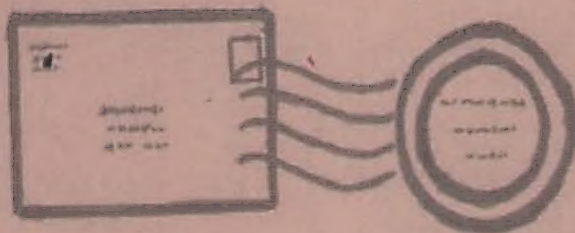


LETTERS HOME

by

Betsy Alkenbrack



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LETTERS HOME

by

Betsy Alkenbrack

With contributions by
Gillian Attwood and Suzanne Smythe

Compiled and edited by
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Literacy BC

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This publication is a product of *e-northwest*, a project funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada.

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The unusual graphics throughout this booklet are "Litema" patterns, reproduced from *Maikutlo: The Thaba Tseka Integrated Rural Development Program* (October 1978). This book defines "Litema" as: "a form of art carved or set in stone on the floor or wall soil-plaster of Basotho houses. This traditional art form is used by Basotho women to beautify their homes."

Foreword



Betsy Alkenbrack, a Canadian literacy practitioner, moved to South Africa eleven years ago at a time when that country, as Betsy puts it, was just waking up from the nightmare of apartheid. The letters in this booklet by Betsy -- and guest writers Gillian Attwood and Suzanne Smythe -- describe life, literacy and community development in the new South Africa.

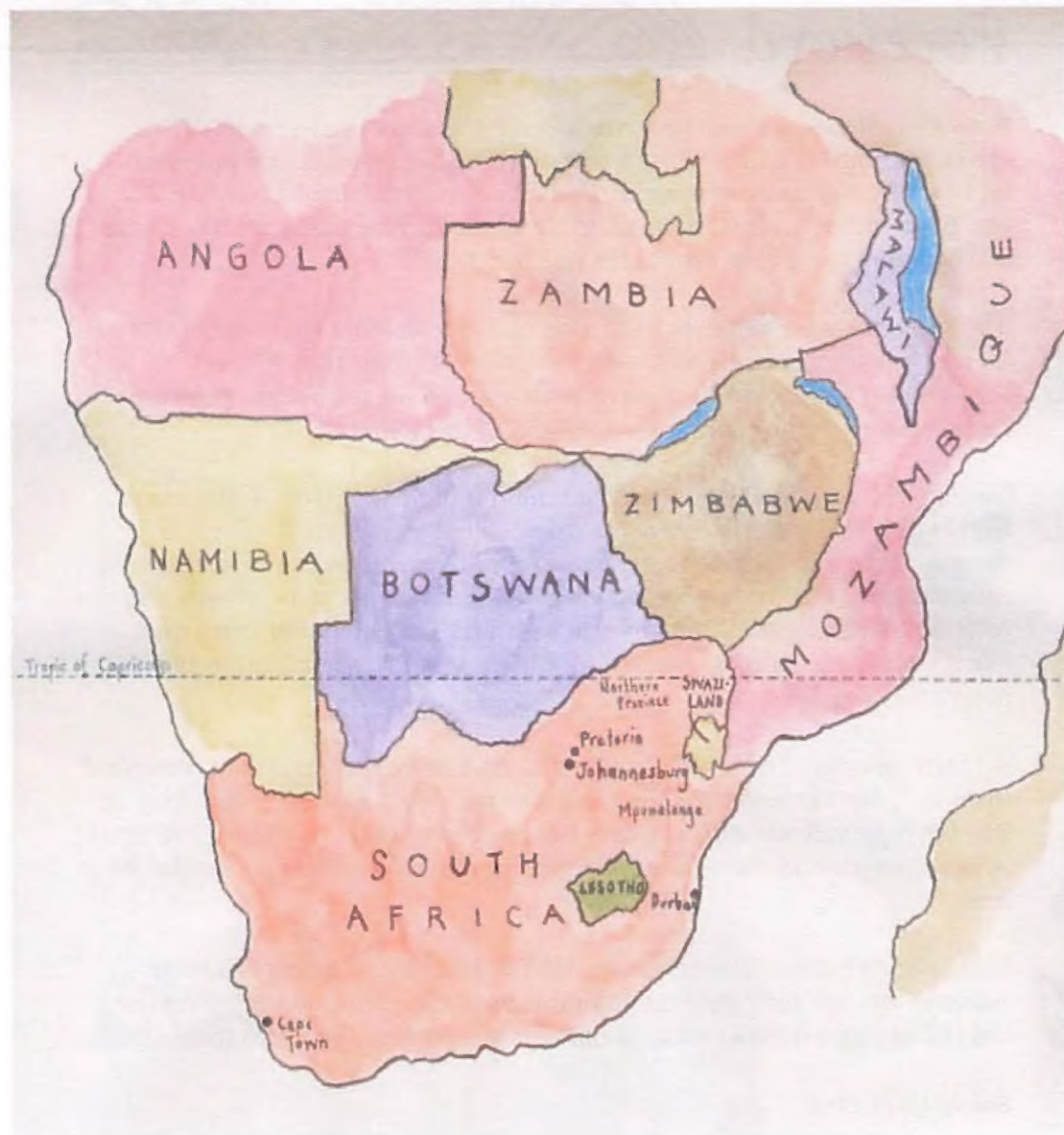
The letters were written over the period of a year and sent electronically to literacy practitioners on *e-northwest*, a literacy electronic network and conferencing service for the western provinces and the territories. (You can find out more about *e-northwest* at the end of this booklet.)

The letters feature rich stories and descriptions of literacy work and learners' lives in diverse settings in Southern Africa. These include rural villages, a women's prison in Johannesburg, workplace literacy in the mines surrounding Johannesburg, English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in Soweto, and community development initiatives in Lesotho. The letters also touch on literacy materials, national standards for literacy, teacher certification and program evaluation.

A practitioner in northern B.C., who first read Betsy's letters on-line, described them as "*Like a morsel of exquisite chocolate that I look forward to indulging in. The letters provide me with a unique learning opportunity -- a glimpse into South Africa's everyday life from the perspective of a woman working in a similar job to mine.*"

I am delighted to introduce these wonderful, informative letters to a wider audience through their publication in this booklet. I hope you enjoy reading and reflecting on them as much as those of us who first discovered them on-line.

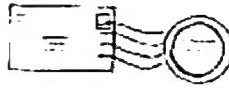
Sandy Middleton



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Friday, May 19, 2000 3:16:25 PM

HELLO FROM SOUTH AFRICA



Dear Friends,

When Sandy asked me to participate in *Letters Home*, I jumped at the chance. I am a Canadian, coming to the end of a ten-year stay in South Africa, and this seems like a great way to reflect on my time here, and prepare for my return to Canada. I hope to get to know some of you in the process. But where to start? How can I neatly sum up this exciting, challenging, enlightening, confusing and frustrating experience in a way that will make sense to you and inspire you to respond? I guess I'll start near the beginning, and hope for the best.

I came here with a background that might be similar to yours. In the 80's, I was a literacy worker in a community programme in downtown Toronto (East End Literacy), where I worked with learners, volunteer tutors and community members. When I arrived in Johannesburg, South Africa was just waking up from the nightmare of apartheid.

Although Mandela had already been released from prison, literacy organisations were still working "underground" with the support of international funders who wanted to support the struggle against apartheid. Literacy was seen to be part of political and social change. I thought I had arrived in heaven. I worked with an organization called English Literacy Project (ELP), teaching factory workers and office cleaners, coordinating learner writing projects, helping rural organisations to develop materials, and editing a newspaper for adult learners. Our motto was "Knowledge is Power!" and the response we got from readers was very inspiring.

Then the elections came in 1994, with mass voter education drives, festive day-long lineups at polling stations, and the satisfaction of helping people to make their mark on a ballot for the first time in their lives.

Well, nothing lasts forever, and things have really changed since then. Like many other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), my beloved ELP has died – the victim of changing funding priorities (money now goes directly to government), lack of marketing skills and commercial competition. The winners are the organisations which can market their “product” and provide an educational package from pre-literacy to high school in all of South Africa’s 11 official languages and about five learning areas. Some would argue that this is more efficient. The government now is the driving force for adult literacy, instead of a rather fragmented NGO movement.

But I worry about the loss of creativity and learner-centredness, and I cringe at the new priorities: national standards and prescribed outcomes-based learning programmes. But I still love South Africa, and South Africans, and marvel at the exciting work that some of them do. In one of my current jobs as a teacher in the Department of Adult Education at a university, I have had the privilege of working with people from all sorts of fields: health educators, teacher trainers, computer trainers, community development workers, small business trainers and lots of literacy facilitators. There is even an ex-prisoner who started teaching when he was behind bars and still works with prisoners.

Closer to the ground, I am teaching English to a group of women who work in pre-schools and daycare centres around Johannesburg. Here’s one woman’s story from her childhood:

“When we walked to school, we had to watch out for the farmers, who tried to force us to work on the farms. So then we would be late for school, and the teachers would punish us by making us stay late. Then we got home and had lots of work to do carrying water and wood, cooking and cleaning. It was dark when it came time to do our homework, but our parents told us not to waste kerosene by lighting lamps. So we would get to school without our homework, and it started all over again.”

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There are happy stories too, which I'll share with you in another letter.

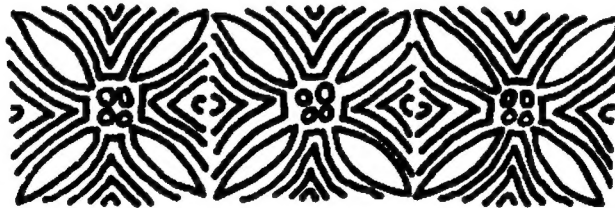
In future weeks, I'll be working on a review of South African literacy materials and visiting a literacy programme in a power plant. So watch this space. There are also some personal stories to tell, about life with my Senegalese husband in a community that suffers growing pains as it changes from a formerly white suburb to a very mixed neighbourhood with lots of immigrants from other African countries.

Thanks for giving me the opportunity to reflect on all of this, and I look forward to hearing from you too.

Talk to you next week!

Stay well,

Betsy





South African school children

All South Africans pay school fees. Those who are unable to pay can be dismissed from school.

The South African Constitution states that every person shall have the right:

“(a) to basic education and to equal access to educational institutions

(b) to instruction in the language of his or her choice where this is reasonably practicable

(c) to establish, where practicable, educational institutions based on a common culture, language or religion, provided that there shall be no discrimination on the grounds of race.”

Friday, May 26, 2000 11:19:05 AM

THE POWER OF STORIES



Dear Friends,

The discipline of writing every week (I promised Sandy that I would!) reminds me of the old days when I worked for *Active Voice* (a newspaper for adult literacy learners) which had a deadline every two weeks. It really taught me a lot about discipline, writing, learning, and what was happening in the literacy world. Now, in a way I am revisiting those times, because I am working on a project to evaluate the literacy materials currently available in South Africa.

A group of us has been sitting together for a week, reading, thinking, discussing and feeling slightly overwhelmed by the stack of courses we will need to look at during the next few weeks. I guess like everywhere else, there are some really good ones and some really bad ones. I was lucky enough to spend most of the week reviewing some good ones.

For example, "English Works", a beginning ESL-literacy course which centres around an ongoing story about the staff in a development NGO. I learned some new things about literacy and about development (the organisation has agriculture, small business and housing projects). But mostly I realised the importance of stories, which the course writers say is "the best way into reading." I found myself reading on because I wanted to know what would happen to Lumko, the single mother, or Justice, the sexist financial manager who eventually got arrested for fraud.

Stories are wonderful, and South Africans seem to be very good at them. But I wonder if stories written by professional course-writers or by learners are best -- which ones are most appealing to other learners? The *Active Voice* learners' page received some brilliant stories from some of our readers, but we sometimes slipped



"I told myself I am going to learn"

*The first project Betsy worked on in South Africa was the production of "I told myself I am going to learn" by literacy learner Elizabeth Ndaba. The book was later translated into several South African languages. This picture shows a cover of the Xhosa edition.**

**Published by Juta & Co., Ltd., 1995*

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in some brilliant ones by staff members when the authentic ones didn't arrive. Both were very popular. What works for you?

South Africans seem to be very good at comic books too. Another course I am reviewing, called "Start-Up", tells the story of a family who sells vegetables at the bus stop to cope with being unemployed. Throughout the story, the book explains how to set up and maintain a small business, simply, clearly and with a few laughs along the way. Small business development has been designated as a priority area in adult education at the moment. With an unemployment rate of 40% (I think), this may be our only hope.

Another great group of story-tellers I have worked with is Soul City, a primary health education organisation which has created a prime-time TV drama to teach about health and social issues. This was a wise move in a country that shuts down when "Days of Our Lives" and "The Bold and the Beautiful" are on. No, I have not become a TV star here, but I have worked with Soul City's adult education department on materials they produce to accompany the television show: comic books and workbooks covering topics such as mother and child health, AIDS, and violence against women. We showed one of their videos on women-abuse to our adult education class at the university, and it led to hours of discussion. The story and the issues raised really struck a chord.

Well Michelle, you said you were looking forward to hearing my stories, but instead I seem to have spent this letter talking about stories. Close enough, I hope. Talk to you soon.

Stay well,

Betsy



Saturday, June 10, 2000 9:26:04 AM

HELLO FROM MPUMALANGA



Dear Friends,

I spent the past week in a small town in Mpumalanga province. Mpumalanga means "where the sun rises", but the name is more picturesque than the landscape around this town. It is sprinkled liberally with the giant cooling towers and transformers of power stations (usually paired up with coal mines, the source of the power). I spent most of my time in a portable next to three of these towers. They are about seven stories high and strangely beautiful in the African winter sunshine.

As a former small-town girl (originally from Napanee, Ontario, for those of you who keep track of such things) I was enchanted by the safe, peaceful atmosphere. Not so enchanted by the "big brother" feeling, for it is definitely a company town. Everyone I met works at the company or in service to the workers. The other unenchanted aspect was the underlying racism still hanging over from old South Africa. While there is a significant number of black people in management, and a very jovial buddy-buddy atmosphere on the job, this seems to end at the plant gates.

For example, at the local "multiracial" primary school, black and white kids share the building, but have separate classrooms. I suppose language would be used as an excuse, because most white people here speak Afrikaans (sort of an African version of Dutch, with a lot of other influences thrown in), while most black people speak Zulu but want their kids to be taught in English.

But this is supposed to be a letter about literacy issues, so I guess I better tell you why I was there. I was contracted by a big company to do an "audit" of their adult



literacy programme, which meant I had to interview as many stakeholders as I could, look at all their records, watch the facilitators in class, look at the materials they use, test some of the learners to see if they were at the right level and, now, write a report with findings and recommendations for improvement.

I occasionally do this kind of work because I think it is good experience for me, but I feel like a bit of a sell-out. I have grave doubts as to whether a parachute visit by an "impartial" outsider can be of any help. For one thing, after four quite intense days on sight, I am no longer impartial. These people have become my friends, and I don't want to hurt anyone or jeopardize anyone's job. For another, to really get useful information, a long-term, mentoring type relationship is needed, but management doesn't want to pay for that. In fact, they won't want to pay for anything I suggest, but their problems have no quick-fix solutions.

Like many adult literacy classes in South Africa, the learners I visited spent a lot of the class time chorus-reading out loud, with frequent interruptions from teachers to correct them. Let me assure you that this is not what the teachers learn in training courses but suggestions for, and demonstrations of, more interactive, authentic reading and speaking activities seem to fall on deaf ears. The most enduring model that these teachers have is their own memory of school under apartheid, which stressed rote learning, "chalk and talk" and corporal punishment.

As I said in my last letter, some of the literacy materials are good with lots of communicative activities, but I notice that teachers usually avoid the interactive parts because they don't believe they will work or don't feel comfortable using them. They also lack confidence in their own ability with English. And learners reinforce this by asking for the methods they know about.





Rural literacy learners

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The result is learners who have great difficulty communicating in English. They smile shyly at the strange white lady, say "good afternoon", and then duck any further conversation. But this is not only due to bad teaching. The learners are largely from rural areas, where the working language is their mother tongue, and work in a plant where supervisors and line managers prefer to speak to them in Afrikaans, and in some cases actively discourage English.

So why, your practical head is probably thinking, should they bother with English? Because most South African industries have decided that English will be the official working language -- even though hardly anyone actually works in it!

Most of the workers are semi-skilled labourers or cleaners. They lack the basic education they need to get promoted, but as one line manager said, they "know their job" really well, and are very dependable. And while they might struggle with English, they can probably communicate in at least two other languages. For example, during an interview, one learner was making a point in SePedi, one of the lesser-used languages at the plant. The translator had some difficulty with it, so the learner effortlessly switched over to Zulu, and probably equally effortlessly converses in Afrikaans with his supervisor.

Most of the workers have left their wives and children in villages far away, and stay here in hostels. Thanks to the work of the unions there has been some improvement in these, but there are still two to four people to a room which makes it difficult to do homework -- another problem.

Having painted a rather negative picture (sorry), I will end by saying that I really admire the work of literacy teachers in rural areas -- their dedication, tenacity and patience. So I hope I can write a report that will support their work and help them to develop their programme. Any advice would be very welcome!

Stay well,

Betsy

Tuesday, June 20, 2000 8:02:56 AM

EDUCATING THE EDUCATORS



Dear Friends,

I have just been reading through a document entitled *Qualifications and Unit Standards for Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) Practitioners*, part of the growing stack of such documents that are being created in South Africa. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) have been set up in an effort to quantify and qualify every single bit of learning that happens in South Africa, from hairdressing to horseback riding, in the form of qualifications and "unit standards". Do you have such things in Canada? (I've been away for 10 years.)

I find them quite oppressive, because of the amount of standardization involved -- and the terrible confusion and inadequacy they arouse in the hearts and minds of many educators -- but perhaps you will find the ideas about ABET practitioners interesting. If you want more details, write to me, or check: <http://www.saqa.org.za/>

The document is a proposed description of what literacy practitioners should be able to do, and how they should be assessed and accredited. The writers describe a four-tiered system for educators, starting with the National Certificate in ABET Practice, available to people with about Grade 10, and designed for people who facilitate learning groups at lower literacy levels under supervision.

Level three (the National Diploma) equips someone to be an "autonomous professional, who is able to make strategic choices around facilitation, materials, assessment, and programme selection". The fourth level is the National First Degree in ABET practice, which should equip people to design programmes; supervise ABET practitioners; develop extended skills in research, evaluation and community development; facilitate learning areas at all ABET levels; and offer specialist input.

The document also contains hundreds of unit standards, which include outcomes, performance criteria and range statements for every aspect of adult education (e.g. "produce a learning event plan", "reinforce prior learning about literacy from mother tongue", "encourage cooperative learning", "evaluate learning programmes and learning materials").

I guess the diploma/degree is where some of the students I work with would fit in. Although the department at the university here works broadly in adult education, a lot of our students are literacy/ABET facilitators.

The students in this year's B.Ed. are doing some very creative work in the area of group facilitation and community development, but still need a lot of help in the areas of research, evaluation and programme design. One of their assignments this year is to design a course for their learning area (everything from literacy to teacher training to health education to computer training). I am really looking forward to seeing what they come up with (though not so excited about the load of marking!).

I would be very interested in hearing from other people who are involved in "educating the educators", whether you work at the community, school or college level. What kinds of training and qualifications are available for adult educators? Have you found creative ways to help educators engage critically with issues in education and unoppressive ways to assess their progress? Do you think there is value in standardization, to specify outcomes and performance criteria?

This is a short one, because I am swamped with work at the moment. I guess you are too, with end-of-year reports and all. I will send one more letter before you all go on holidays, while I settle in for the winter term! Hope to hear from you.

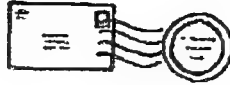
Stay well,

Betsy



Sunday, June 25, 2000 12:03:13 PM

LIVING IN AFRICA



Dear Friends,

A few weeks ago, my partner phoned his mother in Soringho, Senegal. He was so excited he could hardly speak, which is pretty unusual for him. And he assured me that his mother would not be able to sleep that night, there was such a buzz -- especially since she also talked to other sons in New York and Las Vegas. So what was all the fuss? Calls from home are a regular occurrence for me. I can count on receiving a 6:00 a.m. wake-up call from Canada about every two weeks -- my parents saying hi before they go to bed. But this is a first for Moussa and his mother.

This is the first time Moussa has been able to phone his mother in her own home. Finally, phone lines have come to his village. Word traveled with lightening speed around the Soringho community in Johannesburg and the lines buzzed with other men making first calls to mothers, wives and girlfriends.

Moussa tells me his village has been fighting for ten years to get three things: the phone, electricity, and a paved road out to the "highway" (which, though paved, is full of potholes). The electricity hasn't arrived yet. Just before an election, the government promises it will happen soon, then forgets. Well, you may have heard that there was an election not long ago, and the president who was in power for 20 years (and before that 10 as prime minister), was finally deposed. The people of Soringho are skeptical about what they still see as a capitol city-based, Woloff-speaking government that forgets the rural areas and other ethnic groups. Does that ring any bells?



Some of you may have thought that the above description might reflect my life. After all, this is Africa, with only 0.9% of the world's Internet users. But two-thirds of those users are in South Africa. This country, far away from Senegal, is sometimes accused of being the United States of Africa: the richest, the most technologically advanced and the most arrogant on the continent. When I hear the oft-quoted saying, "No hurry in Africa", I would like to add "except on the roads or at work in Johannesburg". Here drivers seldom can keep below the 120 km-per-hour speed limit, and one is often expected to be available 24 hours by cell phone. Why didn't I settle in a peaceful rural area where life is still slow and easy-going?

Well, for one reason, I wouldn't have access to regular email which South Africans, like Canadians, use very creatively. One interesting list I am on is for our local neighbourhood. I live in an area near the centre of the city called Yeoville: once famous for being one of the first mixed-race areas in South Africa, now infamous for declining property values and crime. Migrants from all over the country and the continent live side-by-side with former apartheid activists turned government bureaucrats/development workers. On our email list, we send around minutes of meetings, notices of upcoming events and, of course, complaints. Sometimes hot debate ignites, on everything from squatters/shack-dwellers living in the park to our truly useless and horribly corrupt police service to the rather haphazard garbage collection to the recent installation of a loud-speaker at the local Mosque (it calls Muslims to prayer five times a day).



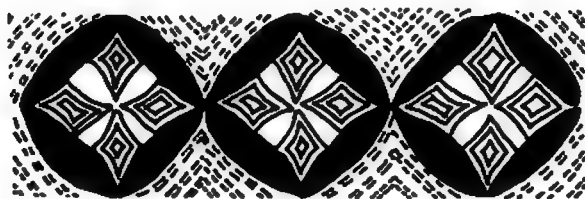
This last one got a range of comments from “not in MY neighbourhood” to “what do the words mean?” to “I support people’s right to religious expression but please can’t they tone it down at five in the morning?” to “I can’t believe how racist and xenophobic you all are: the call to prayer is a wonderful addition to our cosmopolitan community.” The main problem was the 5:00 a.m. call, which was negotiated to a lower volume. (My Muslim husband sleeps through it at any volume.)

This was a bit of a mish-mash letter, with not a mention of literacy. Of course, there is plenty of space for literacy work in this neighbourhood, and those of you who know Suzanne Smythe should ask her about the literacy classes for domestic workers we used to run. But that’s another letter.

I’m told that not much happens on-line over July and August, while you all take a well-deserved break. So these letters will also take a break, although I would be happy (thrilled) to respond to any comments or questions. Please let me or Sandy know if you think *Letters Home* should continue in September and what you want to hear about.

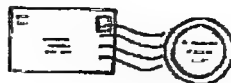
Until then, enjoy the summer and stay well,

Betsy



Wednesday, September 20, 2000 10:09:47 AM

LEARNERS TO THE RESCUE



Dear Friends,

Welcome back to *Letters Home*. Hope you all had a great summer. It has been a short but very cold winter on this side of the planet, and I am really happy to be in sandals again. (But as I update this a few days later, wet winterish weather has descended and the shoes and socks are back on). Over the past few months I have been swamped with challenging but boring tasks like assignment-marking, and I have really missed writing "home". Two bright lights were a visit from Suzanne Smythe and her family (including a trip to Lesotho) and my ongoing work with a group of daycare workers in Soweto. Suzanne will be writing to you about her visit, so let me take you to the class in Soweto.

When I am feeling down – irritated by the careless driving, overwhelmed by the new and burgeoning bureaucracy, afraid of the crime, angry and hurt by the xenophobia – literacy learners can really cheer me up and remind me what is real. The group I have been meeting with every Monday is more like an ESL/upgrading class, but the feeling is the same. They are all daycare workers or preschool teachers who are taking this English course so that they can improve their qualifications and use some English with the children they teach. They are down-to-earth yet sophisticated, funny, generous and happy to share their lives with me.

In July they organised an amazing end-of-term party. We sang, played some games, talked about future courses, and ate hearty food. When it was time to go, as many women as possible crowded into my car to catch a lift to the bus stop. Then we all piled out again when we were alerted to the fact that the back tire was flat (and getting flatter with all the weight in the car). I started to change it, then remembered that I wasn't sure how, and a poor father who had innocently

come to pick up his kid at the daycare centre got dragooned into helping us by Deli, one of the crazier learners in the group. In spite of her rather lackadaisical attitude to learning, she is one of my favourites: extremely talkative (especially when the conversation turns toward Christianity or sex, her two favourite subjects) and she has an amazing singing voice, which often leads the class in spontaneous song.

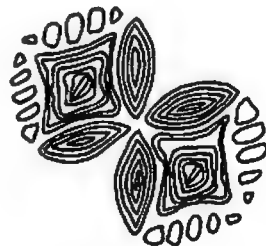
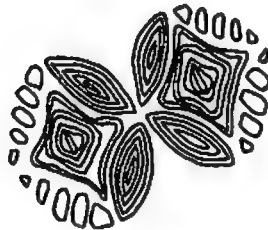
I am starting a list of the things I will miss most when I leave South Africa, and finding myself in the middle of a group singing effortlessly and joyfully in three-part harmony will definitely be near the top. I was particularly appreciative of the music on that day. Since the radio in my car was stolen, I have tended to hum tunes like "Around the World in 80 Days" mindlessly as I drive. But at the party we sang various traditional songs including the lively "Seanna Marina" about a young bride-to-be who hopes to be given a very special blanket as part of her dowry.

The class started again in August, and most of the women came back. Now we are using dialogue journals every week and I am learning a lot. The women are still a bit nonplussed that I don't correct their journal writing, but they like and respond to the personal notes I do write. I will try to share some of their ideas with you at a later date. In the meantime, any advice on journals would be most welcome.

I think that's enough for this letter of the new season. Watch for Suzanne's letter, and I'll be reporting on an inspiring visit with literacy teachers in prison and other adventures soon.

Stay well,

Betsy





Learners often bring their children to class

Thursday, September 21, 2000 12:50:16 PM

REFLECT LITERACY IN LESOTHO



The following letter is by Suzanne Smythe a literacy practitioner in Vancouver and a Ph.D. candidate at the University of B.C.

It is odd to be writing a "letter home" when I am already home (in Vancouver) but let me explain. This past summer my husband Andrew, our daughter Maya and I went back to our other home, South Africa, ostensibly so Andrew could collect data for his thesis, but really because we just wanted an excuse for a visit. I would like to use this space in *Letters Home* to share a very special weekend in the highlands of Lesotho where Gillian Attwood, a lecturer in the Department of Adult Education at Wits University in Johannesburg, has initiated an eco-tourism and sustainable development project using the REFLECT literacy method.

Betsy, Jackie Kirk and I set off on a Friday morning from Johannesburg to visit Gillian and the REFLECT project at Malealea Lodge in the highlands of Lesotho. Jackie is a Ph.D. candidate at McGill who is involved in teacher education research through a joint McGill-South Africa partnership. For those of you who are not familiar with REFLECT, it is a Freireian-inspired literacy and development model developed by David Archer and others at Action Aid in the U.K.

The method aims to involve community members in identifying and analyzing development issues in their community through the use of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques such as matrices, story telling, tree diagrams, flow charts, community maps and so on. Participants draw these in the sand or dirt, using rocks, sticks and branches to symbolize ideas and relationships. These graphic representations are then copied out onto paper as a record of the community's work and for use in later discussion.

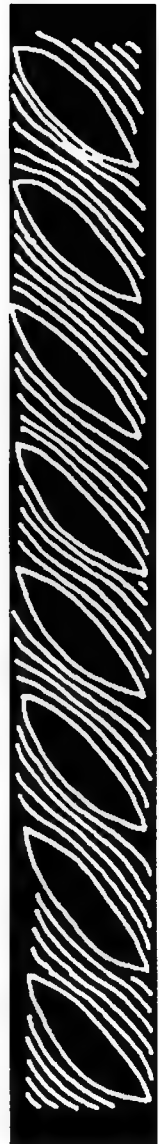
The primary aim of the REFLECT project at Malealea is to help villagers benefit more, both economically and culturally, from tourist activities and to shape the

development of the industry on their own terms. For example, using a matrix, the community identified hikers, pony trekkers, dirt bikers and four-wheel drive "adventure tourists" as the main types of tourists in the area. It was felt that hikers and pony trekkers bring more benefits because they employ guides, pay for the use of villagers' horses, and tend to buy more curios.

There is also more interpersonal contact between these classes of tourists and the villagers. Although there are benefits linked to this (for example, scheduled tourist visits to the school) villagers felt that this contact contributes to an increase in disease, including AIDS. Dirt bikers and four-wheel drivers are less popular. They drive through people's fields, terrorize the animals, contribute to soil erosion and tend to spend little money or time in the village.

In follow-up action planning, the community identified the need to develop arts and crafts to sell to tourists. Small business development training followed and a market analysis. Learning the skills to make these means learning a range of literacy and numeracy skills. The insights from the matrix challenge beliefs that tourism is always a good thing for impoverished communities and that they want development of any kind.

Anyway, back to our trip! We arrived at Malealea just after dark, passing homestead fires in small villages along the way. Ntate Long (Father Long), who is very tall, opened the gates for us and we found our way to the cozy rondavel (round hut) that would be our home for the weekend. In this area of Lesotho, and indeed in most small communities in southern Africa, people address each other as brother (buti), sister (aussi), mother (Mme), or father (Ntate) according to age. People of the same generation call one another buti or aussi and call their elders Mme or Ntate. A woman also can become Mme when she gets married.



We made our way into the dining hall where there were over a hundred tourists from Germany, the Netherlands, France, South Africa and Canada. Signs on the walls informed us of ways to support and learn more about the local community. No longer do tourists visit the school to gawk at the overcrowded, ramshackle schoolhouse and the many children copying and chanting their lessons.

Tanya, a visiting Peace Corps resource teacher, has arranged that tourists interact with the children, share stories about their own country and make a donation to build an extra classroom. This personal contact has provided children with an opportunity to practice English skills and learn about the world. The tourists also enjoy the personal contact and sometimes form long-term relationships with the children and their families. A new classroom is being built through the donations.

The lodge also encourages tourists to take local guides on their walks, consult the village traditional healer (Sangoma), buy children's artwork (this helps them pay their school fees), and attend nightly performances by the local village band and choir. This local band plays traditional Basotho rhythms on homemade instruments while guests listen, dance and learn about local music.

These initiatives offer employment opportunities for older children and adults and represent existing strengths and resources in the community upon which a more focused, education-based strategy for development could be built.

Gillian will tell you much more about the workings of the REFLECT project and the successes and challenges. I will close with a brief description of an extraordinary day walking in the mountains with a group of young village girls ...

Saturday morning we woke to the sounds of the incredible bird life and mountain scenery. It was cold and clear and the views were stunning. Mid-morning we set off on a walk to a waterfall, visiting the new education center on the way. The training programs and literacy and learning circles that have developed out of the REFLECT action plans take place in this converted shed. Outside the shed, some men who participate in the project were putting the finishing touches on a pit toilet. This was



an important step in the life of the project. If they were willing to spend their own time building permanent ablution facilities, they had taken ownership of the project.

We walked on toward the school, open and empty on a Saturday. We were joined by a group of seven girls from the village. One seven-year old had her two-year old sister on her back, the others ranged in age from eight to twelve. They would be our walking companions for the long, six-hour walk to and from the waterfall.

Now a group of eleven, we went to admire newly ploughed fields, the work of a local man who was determined to reclaim the tired soil and use sustainable irrigation and farming strategies to help the village grow food for local consumption, for the lodge, and for the local market. This same farmer planted large aloes along the edge of his field to act as a natural fence to keep out animals and stabilize the soil. With typical community-mindedness, he also planted acacia trees along the path which will one day offer shade and a resting place for families bringing their children down to the local clinic. There is also a phenomenal spinach grower in the community.

During our walk the girls practiced their English and Jackie and I practiced our Sesotho. Betsy and Gillian are fluent Sesotho speakers. We enjoyed many conversations, shared songs, and a lunch when we finally arrived at the falls. On our way we passed women collecting and carrying enormous pieces of firewood on their heads, doing the washing in the river, and collecting water.

I was struck by the amount of time children spend on their own and caring for younger siblings. The older children were naturals at language learning, independent and knowledgeable about their surroundings and incredibly "emotionally intelligent." These aptitudes will no doubt be picked up by their younger siblings. Clearly, patterns of intergenerational learning are more complex than the "Reach the Mother -Teach the Child" approach to literacy and development currently favoured by World Bank. And clearly women would benefit most directly from access to electricity and running water. But this is a topic for another "letter home."

Suzanne

Thursday, September 28, 2000 2:04:21 PM



PRISON LITERACY

Dear Friends,

Last week I had a stimulating and heartwarming encounter with a group of women who are students in the diploma course for adult literacy teachers offered by the University of South Africa (UNISA – a big distance education university that serves most of the African continent). I often find that when you work with a group of people for the first time it takes them some time to get warmed up – but not this group. They were enthusiastic, humorous, critical and curious. They were very interested in discussing the theory and practice they had encountered in their course, and naturally anxious about assignments and upcoming exams. Typical, yet not so typical: all of them are inmates at the Johannesburg Women's Prison.

I went there to run a workshop on group-work with their tutor, Dennis, who is a student in one of my B.Ed classes. Dennis is an ideal person to do this work. He spent nine years behind bars, where he got his high school diploma, and was among the first group of inmates to take part in UNISA's literacy teachers' course. He came out feeling like he had a lot to catch up on, and totally committed to improving prison education for those who are still inside.

Arrival at the prison involved a predictable round of signing books, leaving behind cell phones (and I suppose guns if we carried any) and checking in with the people in charge of prison education. But, while we were clearly locked in, the security seemed quite casual with none of the automated gates and bullet-proof glass that we see in the movies.



The women walked around quite freely, wearing different variations on the prison uniform: polyester pants, skirts or dresses, usually supplemented by sweaters because it was quite chilly in the prison. One of the inmates told me that it is always like that, winter or summer and that "We never see the sun." Although the men's section (including maximum security) has an outside exercise yard, the women are never allowed outside.

During the break one of the women, Nelly, offered to make us coffee, so I went along to help her. I assumed we would go to a kitchen or common room and was a bit surprised when we ended up in her cell. But then it didn't quite fit my image of a cell. It was a very long room lined with bunk beds. I think there might have been about 20 bunks, which means 40 women all together. The room was extremely neat, and quite frilly, with flowered bedspreads and duvets on many of the beds. I sat down on Nelly's bunk and chatted with a few other women while I waited for my coffee. Two of them were in Nelly's literacy class and said they really enjoyed it. The prison literacy classes gave them their first opportunity to go to school.

Which brings me to a really important aspect of the group. All of them are teaching literacy classes, as Dennis says, "in their own community" -- that is, with other inmates in the prison. Many of our conversations were about how to improve their teaching: how to keep the motivation up, how to make classes interesting and relevant with limited resources, how to deal with the childish and inappropriate materials they are forced to use because the prison doesn't want to spend money ... so much for its commitment to rehabilitation and capacity building!

And finally, what can prisoners (both the teachers and learners) do next when the course is finished? The current group of literacy teachers is studying on bursaries but they are not sure if there will be more bursaries for the diploma course or other studies. The literacy learners can go on to study high school subjects, but there are few opportunities for more practical courses such as small business development or technical training.

L·E·T·T·E·R·S · H·O·M·E

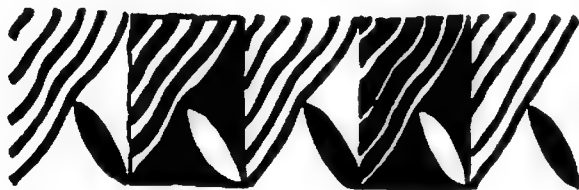
When we left I had two questions for Dennis. Did the women really get along as well as they seemed to? This is a "rainbow nation" group, with three white women, one Asian, three of mixed race and eight African (well, they are actually all African but "African" seems to be a more preferable term than "black"). But the reality in post-apartheid South Africa, where all races are now equal, is that they still don't mix together easily or comfortably. Dennis said he has seen evidence of racism and racial tension, but not too much.

But my main question was "What are such nice people doing in prison?" This was a question I wouldn't dream of asking the women themselves, although one literacy learner I talked to hinted that she had been forced to do something illegal in order to support her big family. Dennis said many of the women get involved in drug trafficking, often under the influence of boyfriends or bosses.

It was a fascinating visit, and I would love to hear from any of you who are working with prisoners. Although I won't be in South African much longer, I could pass any suggestions you have on to Dennis.

Stay well,

Betsy



Friday, October 06, 2000 1:48:42 AM

GUEST WRITER



I have finally made good on my promise to bring in a guest writer. Actually, Suzanne has already introduced Gillian in a previous letter, so all I need to do is hand you over to her. Enjoy! Betsy.

Greetings to all. My name is Gillian Attwood, and I am most pleased to have a chance to share with people some work that is happening in a valley in the southwest of a country called Lesotho. Not only is it good to have a chance to share what's happening in this corner of the world, but also to get your takes on it. Who knows, some of you may in time even be tempted to come and visit ... My thanks to Betsy for introducing me, and to Suzanne for providing a most informative and comprehensive introduction to the project.

A bit of background ... Lesotho is a small country, completely landlocked by South Africa. In some ways, the borders between the two countries are really quite artificial, but in other ways, Lesotho is a distinct and very separate entity. It has its own politics, its own traditions and its own set of development-related issues with which to contend. Lesotho was a British protectorate until 1966, when it gained its independence. Although the king of Lesotho no longer has governmental powers, Lesotho still retains its monarchy status. As a very mountainous area, it is known as the "Kingdom in the Sky".



A Lesotho hat

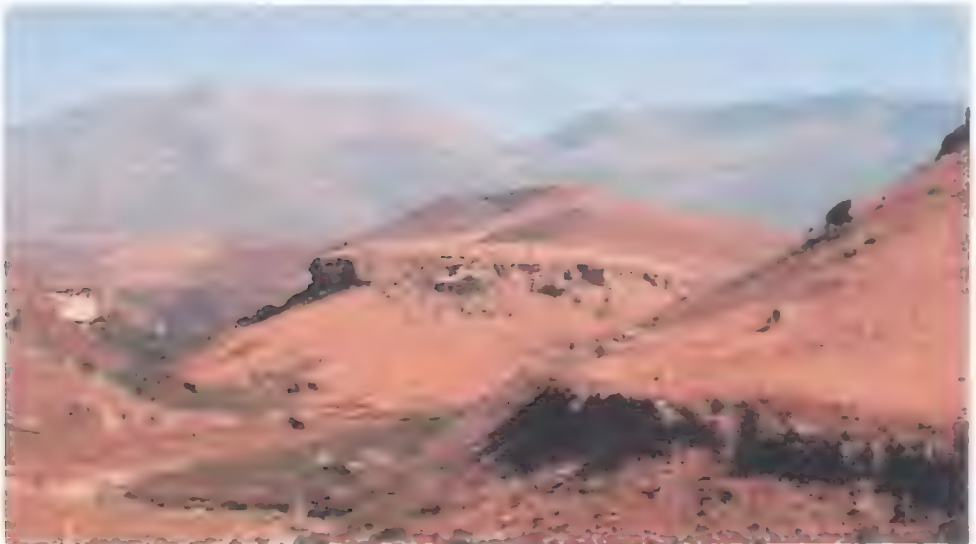
Malealea is a remote valley situated at the foothills of the dramatic Thaba Putsoa range of mountains in the district of Mafeteng. The valley is in many ways typical of remote areas in Lesotho. Inhabitants rely primarily on subsistence agriculture for survival, and struggle to eke out an existence in a context of poverty and unemployment. Many families do not have sufficient funds to feed their children, let alone to send them to school (which is not free). Until recently, families subsidised their income by working as migrant labourers in the South African goldmines. However, a global drop in gold prices has meant that large numbers of miners were laid off and forced to return home to their villages. The effect is not only a lack of a much needed cash income, but also an increased pressure on already vulnerable environmental resources.

This may seem bleak but the landscape of possibility for development in this valley has been changed by the establishment of a successful tourist lodge. In peak season the lodge accommodates as many as 80 people per night. The steady influx of tourists wishing to sample the life of rural Lesotho provides a range of opportunities for local inhabitants to generate a sustainable income and thus counteract the effects of poverty and unemployment. Opportunities for income generation exist through the sale of indigenous crafts to tourists, as well as through partnerships between the lodge and the community. An example of such a venture is a pony trekking initiative: local inhabitants hire their horses to tourists staying at the lodge. Local guides are employed to lead the excursions by horseback as well as by foot. (Many people prefer to keep their feet on the ground!)

While this all sounds (and is!) very positive, there are also dangers inherent in the influx of tourists. One danger is that the community responds to tourists' needs, rather than taking charge of the development process and tourism activities in accordance with local needs and knowledge. For example, Suzanne mentioned in her letter the negative effects of the 4x4ers and motor bikers on the area.

However, "taking charge" is not necessarily a straightforward process for a group of people who do not have access to economic and power structures. Aggravating this marginalisation is the fact that many people have not developed formal literacy and numeracy skills. This may be because they have been shepherds their whole lives, or perhaps they have just not had the opportunity to go to school. The central aim of the project is to provide support for the Malealea community to drive the development process according to *their* needs and visions. Call it empowerment. There are two main focal points for this process.

The first provides support and training for the establishment of self-sustaining income generation projects. Project members have organised themselves into three different areas of activity. The first team makes carved products and wooden furniture. The second team makes local crafts such as woven baskets, clay pots, and hats. They



Lesotho, the "Kingdom in the Sky!"

also make dolls and embroidered products depicting local life. The third team produces fresh garden produce that is sold to the community and the lodge. The teams work together as a co-operative. To support the sustainability of the co-operative, members have also had training in project management skills and small business skills.

The second area we are focusing on is the development of a cadre of community development facilitators. Twenty people so far have been trained in the REFLECT methodology and will soon be setting up community learning circles in eight different villages in the valley. As Suzanne explained, REFLECT is an approach that integrates adult literacy with the theory and practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal and Participatory Learning and Action. By gathering together people in different villages, these facilitators start a process of collaborative learning. Participants of the learning circles work together to think about and analyse issues important to them in their communities. They identify the issues, analyse them using the different PRA tools, and then plan what action should be taken. In this process, people are also given an opportunity to learn literacy and numeracy skills in an applied context. They use the graphics that they construct as resource material for learning literacy and numeracy.

The two focal points are fairly separate and we are not sure what their relationship to each other should be. I hope we will find ways to bring them closer to each other. But it is still early days and, for now, we are leaving it to evolve organically ...

It seems to me that while I have provided you with a skeleton of the activities of the project I have rather left out the heart of it. This, of course, is the people who are involved and who have shown such commitment to development in their area.

Gillian

Sunday, February 18, 2001 1:45:57 AM

TESTING, TESTING, TESTING



Dear Friends,

Remember me? The prodigal *Letters Home* daughter from Johannesburg. I am embarrassed to note that the last time I wrote was in October last year. I don't know what happened, but somehow work and life took over and the inspiration just didn't flow. I thought I might be seeing some of you in person by now, but my plans to move to Vancouver have been delayed and my partner and I will be arriving in June instead. A much kinder season for two "Africans" to arrive in Canada!

First, a quick update. I saw Dennis, the prison tutor the other day, and he proudly reported that all the women in the adult literacy educators' programme had passed and will get scholarships to go on to the next course (See *Prison Literacy*).

And Gillian's work in Lesotho (See *Guest Writer*) continues to be amazing, with most of the REFLECT literacy circles going well and the income generation groups flourishing. I have put in an order for pillowslips embroidered with pictures of village life which I hope to show off when I get home. They started the year with an evaluation and planning session, including a detailed discussion of how the money made by the various income-generation groups should be distributed. Instead of getting paid individually for the individual products they make, the group has opted for a co-operative structure. The money will go into a central fund, then a percentage will be taken out to pay for expenses and support for the literacy classes, and the remainder will be distributed to the craftspeople/carpenters/gardeners based on a points system. In a society that increasingly seems to encourage individualism and quick money schemes, I find this structure inspiring.



I was interested to read the letters on assessment in the *e-northwest Ask an Expert* folder, and thought that might be a good place to start writing. I think I have mentioned in previous letters that I am a member of a panel that develops national ABET (Adult Basic Education and Training) exams for an NGO called the Independent Examinations Board (IEB). This always seems like such a contradiction to me, with my "non-formal" background. But the exams are a fact of life around here: funders will not support organisations which don't send learners to write them. And, in spite of all the rhetoric about assessing learners at their own pace, and continuous formative assessment, these tests are the ultimate judge of when learners will be promoted and how. I do have mixed feelings about this work, but the exam I was involved with recently was quite nice: a functional section based on a domestic worker's timetable, a writing task about a marketplace and a comprehension section with a story about a mixed (white and black) marriage. This is still a hot topic in a country that only scrapped the "immorality act" -- prohibiting mixed marriages -- in the 80's.

To give the IEB credit, they pay a lot of attention to making the exams relevant to South African literacy learners, including offering the exams in most of our 11 official languages. But this initiative has had disappointing results. For one thing, the number of learners who write literacy exams in their mother tongue are much smaller than those who write them in English. This is probably because industry (still the biggest provider of literacy classes) refuses to allow their learners to enroll in mother tongue literacy classes. They say it is a waste of time and money. Even learners themselves often want to move quickly into English, which they see (rightly) as being the language of power. But research shows that learners who get a good grounding in their own language will do much better when they move on to other languages, and the IEB recommends that learners do at least two levels of mother tongue literacy classes before they start learning English.



The second language-related problem is that learners who write the numeracy (math) exams in their mother tongue get worse results than those who write the exams in English! There are a few possible reasons for this: the numeracy materials are all written in English; the numeracy tutors/facilitators have probably been trained in English and may have difficulty teaching it in another language, even if it is their own mother-tongue; perhaps the learners who write the exam in English have had more "academic development" (i.e. more years of literacy classes and more experience with exams).

A South African university is setting up a literacy assessment project using portfolios. I see that this was also discussed in the *Ask an Expert* folder. I don't know much about the project here, but will try to find out more, especially if any of you are interested. Let me know.

I'll write again SOON - promise - and hope to hear from you too!

Stay well,

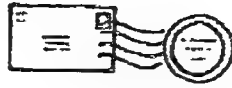
Betsy



Learners prepare for national ABET exams

L · E · T · T · E · R · S · H · O · M · E

Saturday, March 24, 2001 12:09:55 AM



GOING NORTH PART 1

Dear Friends,

I want to tell you about a recent trip I took to the rural Northern Province, as part of a national evaluation of the government's adult learning centres. In order to keep the letters short, I have written them in two parts. This one describes my thoughts and feelings as I drive through the province, and in part two I describe the adult learning centres I visited.

It is a sunny Sunday morning and I am happy to get out of Joburg and the province of Gauteng ("the place of gold", now better known as the place of industry and crime) and drive north along the main highway that links us with the rest of Africa.

This is the road that Zimbabweans travel along when they go home, their trucks and vans loaded down with everything from running shoes to fridges to bicycles.

This is the road that takes tourists (including me once) to amazing places like Victoria Falls (higher than Niagara, and just as beautiful) and Great Zimbabwe, the largest prehistoric structure south of the Sahara. It was a city with curving monumental walls that once enclosed houses, home in its heyday (14th and 15th centuries) to some 12,000 to 20,000 people. It was once linked to Phoenicians, Egyptians and even the Queen of Sheba by Euro-centric historians, but more professional and enlightened work has shown that it is definitely of local African origin.

This is the road that a lot of learners I have known take to their Easter pilgrimage at Moria, the centre of the Zionist Christian Church, one of the many indigenous churches that has blended Christianity with African traditions.

This is the road I used to travel several years ago when I visited Akanani Rural Development Association, one of the leading voices for rural literacy. We visited them quite often, always impressed with the way they combined support for co-operatives, small business development, popular theatre and adult literacy. They worked in two of the most marginalised South African languages: Tsonga, which is spoken through the province and into Mozambique; and TshiVenda, which is different from all the other South African languages.

Once we did a workshop with literacy educators at Akanani and produced a newspaper in Tsonga. This was in some cases the first real reading material learners had seen in their own language (aside from dreadful government-produced story-books). There is still a shortage, according to some of the teachers I visited on this trip.

But on this trip, I won't be going to Zimbabwe, or visiting Akanani, because I am here on government business. I will tell you more about the business later, but for now please indulge me as I continue to relive the drive ...

I don't know whether I have mentioned this before, but it is quite possible to live in Johannesburg and forget you are in Africa. But when you drive north, the landscape unfolds in a way that says Hey! this is Africa. First, there are the classic African thorn trees and cactus-type shrubs of the dry grassland. (I've heard there are even some baobabs, but I didn't see any on this trip.)

Then there are rolling green mountains. I passed over the Tropic of Capricorn, which is marked by a big rock out-cropping, an ugly needle-like statue and a lot of very ugly graffiti. There are women wrapped in the traditional brightly-coloured cloth -- traditional dress that is so graceful and practical -- carrying heavy loads on their heads. And eventually there are villages with mud thatched-roof huts.

L·E·T·T·E·R·S · H·O·M·E



I am to spend my first night in Venda, one of the former homelands during apartheid times, now part of the Northern Province. To get there, I leave the main highway about 60 km short of the Zimbabwe border, and go east towards Thoyandou, the former "capital" of Venda. The road gets noticeably worse. I am reminded of a comment my colleague made before I left: "I wonder if they have repaired the roads after the floods?"

Remember the floods in Mozambique last year? Well, this part of South Africa was also affected. Some of our university students from this area were not able to come in for classes. One in particular apologised for not sending in an assignment because the roads were flooded and the telephone lines were down. Not that he would have been able to email me if there had been a line. He has to go to the next village to use his brother's fax machine ...

In spite of the occasional pot-hole and construction sights, I felt very content as I made my way east towards Thoyandou. Maybe it was the beautiful late afternoon African light, which seems to make everything glow. Maybe it was the waving children that made me feel welcome. What kept coming into my mind was: I love this country, and what a privilege it is to be living and working here!

Stay tuned for part 2 ...

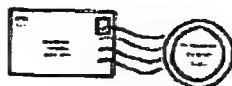
Stay well,

Betsy



Saturday, March 24, 2001 12:17:32 AM

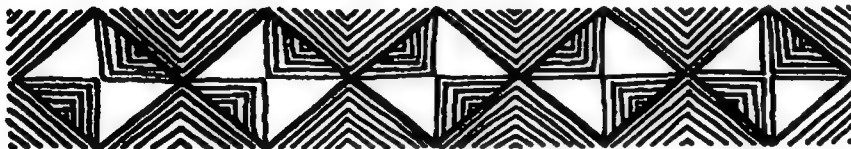
GOING NORTH - PART 2



Dear Friends,

I went to the Northern Province as part of a national evaluation of the Rivoningo Project (and I am sorry to admit that I have no idea what that means). This was a national pilot project in which five Public Adult Learning Centres (PALCs) in each province were set up as models of good practice. The support included the purchase of learning materials, computers, and classroom furniture (along with security systems to ensure that they didn't disappear), curriculum development, and training for educators in outcomes-based education – using, selecting and adapting learning materials, learning programmes, assessment and centre management. The project is now officially coming to an end and the funder wants to find out how successful it was. So I traveled to each of the five centres in the province to talk to the staff, and at the same time other evaluators were doing the same in the nine other provinces.

I met with dynamic centre managers, committed educators and representatives of Centre Governing Bodies (CGB), which were completely new in the province. They proudly showed me their business plans and described the advocacy they had done for their centres and their communities, as a result of training they received through the project.



Here are the centres I visited:

- ▶ Centre A is temporarily in the police college, preparing another building for permanent occupation.
- ▶ Centre B is based in a former pre-school, so can offer classes all day. I met with a dynamic and well-organised group. They have made some inroads into becoming a community resource, offering a "mini-library" and income-generating services such as typing, photocopying and vegetable growing.
- ▶ Centre C only started late in August last year and they were not as energetic or well-organised. They seemed to be sharing the building with the regular school quite happily, and were able to start classes at two in the afternoon.
- ▶ Centre D was physically the best centre of all: a lovely colonial-looking stone and brick building, formerly a district office, now given over entirely to the PALC, with lots of space for adult classes. They were also well-organised, giving me an impressive annual report. But morale was low, especially when we discussed the CGB. Policy states that the CGB has the power to control its own centre but, according to this group, there is a power-hungry district co-ordinator who denies them this and keeps information and resources away from them. Yet I got the distinct impression that they expect a lot of things to be given to them -- power, flipchart stands and cooking equipment. Like some other centres, they saw me as someone to give a shopping list to, rather than to discuss real problems and issues with.
- ▶ In contrast with Centre D, the workers at Centre E were not sitting back waiting for help. The centre buzzed with activity during our meeting. The group seemed to be highly motivated and self-sufficient. In addition to ABET classes conducted from 5:30 - 8:00, they have sewing, cooking and computer

classes. They had secured grants from other sources, and their sewing classes provide affordable school uniforms to local families.

One serious problem they identified was security for women going home after classes. Muggings and rapes had been reported. They were working on two options: assistance with transport, and finding a new building where they could offer classes during the day so that women would not have to travel after dark. This was my favourite centre.

So what conclusions did I draw? This is always the hardest part of an evaluation and as soon as I finish this letter, I have to finish my report. I think the project has benefited the centres, and maybe even the province as a whole, since some non-pilot centres have had access to some of the new resources. But it is not enough.

The educator is often accused of being "the weakest link", because she somehow doesn't implement what she has learned at workshops -- she falls back on the old methods she grew up with. But she needs more than the occasional workshop. She needs long-term mentoring and support. And that of course takes money and a new attitude towards ABET.

And that brings me to the biggest problem. As the provincial director said, "ABET is sidelined in terms of money, especially in this province where the rate we are growing is minimal compared with the illiteracy rate: one million can't read, 1.4 million are barely literate in their home language." Around the country, there seems to be an attitude that ABET is no longer important. But after this trip, I am more convinced than ever that it needs to be firmly on the national agenda, with solid financial resources to support it. The Rivoningo centres have shown me that they can make a difference, if only given a chance.

Stay well,

Betsy



Saturday, April 21, 2001 2:28:36 PM

SOME WOMEN LEARNERS



Dear Friends,

I want to share some interesting information gathered by my B.Ed students for an ABE studies course. They went out to interview adults with less than three years of schooling who are in mother tongue literacy classes. Almost all the women interviewed said the main reason they did not go to school was that their parents felt it was a waste of time and money to give a girl an education, because she is just going to get married and there is no need. In a family with severely limited resources, the boys always got preference.

One woman said: *"My family thought that if they paid my big brother's school fees (yes, everybody pays school fees in South Africa) he would graduate, get a job, and then pay for mine. But by the time he was finished school, I already had two babies and other things to think about."*

Mrs. Matubatuba is a highly respected community activist, who is often called on for advice and support or to represent her area on committees. She is afraid to attend literacy classes at the neighbourhood school because she doesn't want her neighbours to see her there. She quietly gets help from her family and a retired schoolteacher. Her goals are mainly related to meetings, minutes, and reports, and her motivation is high.

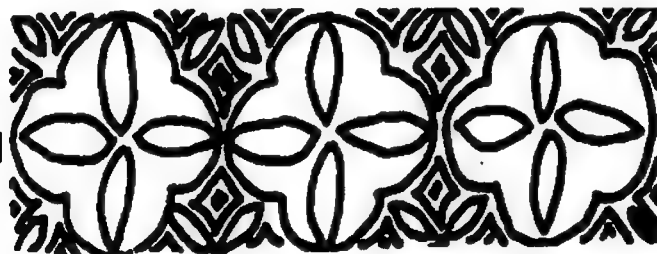
Mrs. Matla has six children of her own and five of her late sister's to take care of. Both her sisters died of AIDS, leaving her to care for the family. She says, *"If I had been literate, I would have been able to teach my siblings about the dangers of sleeping around, and read articles about AIDS."*

Mrs. Tshabalala is also a victim of the AIDS epidemic. She is supporting her two HIV+ children and five grandchildren on her pension of R 500 per month. Leaving children at home with granny has always been a common custom in South Africa, but it has been made worse by increased unemployment and HIV-AIDS.

Too late for the Matlas and Tshabalalas, but good news just the same: this week we celebrated the fact that 39 multi-national drug companies dropped their case against the South African government. The drug companies were trying to block the implementation of legislation that aims to improve access to essential medicines by making drugs more affordable. Now South Africa and other developing countries will be able to import more affordable medicines, like generic drugs. Viva!

Stay well,

Betsy



*The Coon: A new publication from Viva Books,
a South African publisher**



*From the back cover of
The Coon:*

The word coon was insulting enough for Alexander Meintjies. How could a person stoop so low as to dance to rowdy music through the streets of Cape Town with his face smeared black and white with paint? And to allow himself to be taken advantage of by the white oppressors?

As the new cultural official of the New Unity Association, Mr. Meintjies decided that he must save the masses from themselves. But he quickly found out that the world of the Coons was not as straightforward as he thought ...

** The Coon is published by Viva Books and their North American distributor, Peppercorn Books.
Contact: Peppercorn Books & Press, PO Box 693, Snow Camp, NC 27349. Phone: (336) 574-1634
Fax: (336) 376-9099 www.peppercornbooks.com*

Saturday, September 22, 2001 1:49:18 PM

THE LAST LETTER HOME – FROM HOME!



Dear Friends,

I have been in Vancouver for a month now and am finally getting around to checking in. I have just read through the letters and some of them actually brought tears to my eyes. Not because of the brilliant prose, but because I just miss South Africa so darn much.

Don't get me wrong –Vancouver is indeed a beautiful place. We used to describe it to our friends in South Africa as the Cape Town of Canada, and that's a real compliment! To see the mountains from wherever I am and watch sunsets over the ocean is a privilege for someone who has lived for the past eleven years in a landlocked city with very little natural beauty. And I can't say enough about the people: old friends and family who have taken me under their wings and provided me with things I need to get started in my new life, new friends who have made me feel welcome, even friendly and helpful strangers. It's a huge relief to walk the streets at night without fear and jump on a bus that will take me anywhere I want to go. (I arrived after the famous bus strike was over!)

So why the tears? I think I am going through what many immigrants do (of course, I am a very privileged "immigrant"!): moving from a place where I had a purpose in life and was known and respected for my professional work to being an unknown beginner in the Ph.D. programme at UBC. Trying to learn or relearn the cultural norms that everyone else knows (driving on the right side of the road, wearing the right clothes, writing the bin number on bulk food tags, even using the right vocabulary). I miss Moussa (my partner still waiting for immigration clearance), my South African friends, and seeing Africans wherever I go.

Here are some of the Africans I thought of as I read through the letters:

- ▶ Nume Mashinini, who came to work with me on the *Active Voice* newspaper (see *Hello from South Africa*, 05/19/00) as a fresh-faced, enthusiastic and revolutionary graduate with amazing writing skills. We once did a workshop with a rural NGO in the Northern Province (see *Going North*, 3/24/01). Soweto born and bred, he was shocked to see monkeys on the roof, but slipped easily into the language spoken in that part of his country. He is now a fresh-faced, not so enthusiastic, but still revolutionary, administrator at the Ford Foundation.
- ▶ Still in Northern Province, I think of Maria, a teacher at one of the adult learning centers I visited this year (see *Going North* 3/24/01). She took me to her modest self-built home on the side of a mountain with a breathtaking view over the valley. Urbanites would pay a lot for this view, but she chose the spot to keep her safe from floods.
- ▶ A group of storytellers I forgot to mention (see *The Power of Stories*, 06/24/00): Viva Books, who have spent the last six years publishing wonderful stories by African writers and when necessary adapting them for ESL readers. The first time I used them with a class was the first time my learners (women office cleaners) asked to buy the books.
- ▶ The daycare workers in my Soweto class who sang their beautiful songs and brought so much joy to my life as we struggled together to improve their English so that they could get qualifications in the Early Childhood Development field. (see *Learners to the Rescue*, 9/20/00)



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- ▶ The IEB examiners I worked with who are probably meeting right now to finalize the national ABE exams that learners will write in November -- the end of the school year in South Africa! (see *Testing, Testing, Testing* 2/18/01)
- ▶ A group of inmates in the Johannesburg Women's Prison who may be studying for the Adult Literacy Diploma and teaching literacy to their sister inmates -- or may be trying to build a new life outside. I really wish them well, wherever they are. (see *Prison Literacy*, 09/28/00)

That's all, folks. Thanks for reading and giving me this chance to reflect and learn.

Sala hantle -- "Stay well" in Sesotho,

Betsy



L·E·T·T·E·R·S · H·O·M·E

Betsy Alkenbrack returned to Canada from South Africa in July 2001. Currently living in Vancouver, Betsy began doctoral studies at the University of B.C. in September in the Department of Educational Studies.

If you have comments or questions about Letters Home, you can email Betsy at: alkenbra@interchange.ubc.ca



***Betsy and Moussa at their wedding
in Johannesburg in April 2000***

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Sandy Middleton

The *e-northwest* literacy electronic network and conferencing service

What is *e-northwest*?

e-northwest is a unique collaboration among the western provinces, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut that is building a regional literacy electronic network and conferencing service.

Through *e-northwest*, literacy practitioners are able to:

- ❖ Share ideas and experiences and make connections with colleagues in other provinces and territories.
- ❖ Access literacy resources and information, quickly and cost effectively.
- ❖ Participate in new forums for discussion and learning with literacy experts and helpful peers.

Since May 2000, *e-northwest* has:

- ❖ Facilitated the development of new on-line networks among the literacy communities in Manitoba and Saskatchewan.
- ❖ Built new connections among literacy practitioners in the western provinces.
- ❖ Supported a needs assessment in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut to facilitate the future development of electronic networking within their literacy communities and ongoing connections with *e-northwest*.
- ❖ Hosted electronic conferences on important topics in literacy, moderated by guest facilitators, that have contributed to professional development within the literacy field.

For more information about *e-northwest*, and to find out how you can participate, contact:

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Sala Hantle
(Stay Well)